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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002692

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [VE](#) [CU](#)
SUBJECT: FORMER FM ALI RODRIGUEZ NAMED AMBASSADOR TO CUBA

REF: CARACAS 002348

CARACAS 00002692 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: COUNSELOR FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS ROBERT DOWNES,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. President Chavez's designation of former foreign minister Ali Rodriguez as Ambassador to Cuba on August 31 demonstrates that Chavez continues to make Venezuelan-Cuban relations one of his top foreign policy priorities. It may also portend the BRV's determination to play an important -- and unhelpful -- role in the democratic transition process in Cuba. Chavez heaped praise on Rodriguez at a September 1 mass rally, stressing that he replaced him on August 9 as foreign minister only for health reasons. With his background as a former foreign minister, OPEC Secretary General, Energy Minister, and President of the Venezuelan Petroleum Corporation (PDVSA), as well as stints as a 1960's "guerrillero," Rodriguez brings both considerable experience and influence to the BRV Embassy in Havana. End Summary.

The BRV's New Man in Havana

¶2. (C) President Chavez designated former foreign minister Ali Rodriguez Araque to replace his brother Adan Chavez as the BRV's Ambassador to Cuba. Upon his return from his latest world tour, which reportedly concluded with yet another stop to visit the ailing Fidel Castro in Havana, Chavez lauded Rodriguez at a September 1 mass rally in downtown Caracas. Chavez noted that he had relieved Rodriguez as foreign minister only because of his pressing health problems. Rodriguez had served as foreign minister since November 21, 2004, but suffered from prostrate cancer as well as heart trouble. He recently underwent knee replacement surgery in Cuba, followed by a lengthy recuperation there.

¶3. (U) In his first comments to the press after his designation, Rodriguez highlighted the "mutual benefits" of the BRV's close relations with Cuba, noting that the poorest sectors of the Venezuelan population have been assisted by Cuban health and education programs. At the same time, Rodriguez stated that Cuba has benefited from the BRV's energy assistance, which he said has "in a way, broken the (U.S. trade) embargo." Rodriguez told the media that he did not know when he would take up his new post. (Note: The NAM Summit in Havana begins September 11; the MFA reported on September 6 that Chavez had not yet decided whether to

attend).

Experience and Influence

¶4. (C) Ali Rodriguez served as Foreign Minister from November 21, 2004 to August 9, 2006, when he was replaced by then-National Assembly President Nicolas Maduro (Reftel). During his tenure, Rodriguez, flanked by five high profile MFA Vice Ministers, loyally served what he called President Chavez's "multipolar" foreign policy. Unlike his successor at the MFA, Rodriguez was believed to have been a moderating influence on Chavez. Rodriguez first served Chavez as Minister of Energy and Mines (1999-2000), before being elected Secretary General of OPEC in January 2001, where he was widely considered an effective consensus-builder. He pursued Chavez's statist line as President of the Venezuelan Petroleum Corporation from April 2002 to November 2004.

¶5. (C) Rodriguez represented several left-wing parties in Congress from 1983, both as a deputy, and later, a senator from Bolivar State, until he was named President of PDVSA in ¶2002. Prior to his legislative career, Rodriguez was a litigation attorney from the mid-1960's until 1983. With prior experience as a leftist leader who participated in Venezuela's guerrilla movements in the late 1960's and early 1970's, Rodriguez should be reflexively well-disposed toward and welcomed by Cuba's hard-line leaders. While clearly a man of the far left, among Venezuelans, Rodriguez has a reputation as a serious, even scholarly individual, with whom one can sustain a dialogue.

Additional Bio Data

CARACAS 00002692 002.2 OF 002

¶6. (SBU) Ali Rodriguez will turn 69 on September 9. He is a member of Chavista coalition partner Patria Para Todos (PPT), and a former member of Causa R. He has a law degree from the Venezuelan Central University (1961), but also studied economics, with a specialty in oil. Rodriguez has been married -- and divorced -- two times. He currently has four adult children; two sons are deceased. He reportedly requires continued medical attention, and his assignation to Havana will facilitate his continued treatment by Cuban doctors.

WHITAKER